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AUTHOR Hoskins, Marie
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ABSTRACT

A constructivist framework can often appear vague and abstract to the novice counselor. The abstract and nebulous realm of meaning-making, which is central to constructivist approaches, can be frustrating for a linear, task-oriented counselor. This digest explains the approaches used in constructivist counseling. The need to use constructivist counseling arose from the belief that youth did not feel empowered or motivated to put their career information to use. It was concluded that a counseling approach which empowers clients to adopt proactive, mindful stances about their worklife, needed to be developed. So the critical reflection approach focuses on helping clients understand how their self-organizing principles shape their world view and influence and direct the choices they make. Ways in understanding these principles include helping clients understand how they interpret the events of their lives in the pursuit of meaning. Likewise, counselors must help clients create stories or narratives using devices such as metaphor and critical reflection. Such stories will enhance self-knowledge and enable the client to assess life positions. Counselors also must take care to instill in clients a sense of power. Many times counselors simply "test them" and "tell them," thus disempowering clients by diminishing their ability to choose. (RJM)

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by Marie Hoskins

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Constructivist Approaches For Career Counselors

Marie Hoskins

Overview

Constructivist theory offers alternative approaches to career development and counseling. Based on holistic approach, constructivism emphasizes the self-organizing principles underlying human experience. The decision to use a constructivist framework for career counseling resulted from the observation that youth often were not lacking career information; instead, they did not feel empowered or motivated to put the information to use. In a number of cases, feelings ranging from disempowerment to apathy, were due to a lack of knowledge about self in relation to the world of work. Consequently, it was concluded that a counseling approach, which empowers clients to adopt proactive, mindful stances about their worklife, needed to be developed. Therefore, a focus was developed that would assist clients in understanding how their self-organizing principles shape their world view and influence and direct the choices they make.

Within this proactive, constructivist framework several core counseling approaches were identified as important for career counselors. The more essential ones will be summarized below.

Meaning-Making

One of the basic tenets of a constructivist approach is that people are meaning-makers. Terms such as "autopoesis," "sense-making," "self-organizing," and "meaning-making" have been researched and described by numerous constructivist writers (Carlsen, 1988; Mahoney, 1991) and include specific references to how people interpret the events of their lives in the pursuit of meaning. A constructivist premise is that career information is enhanced significantly when personal meanings become the central task of the counseling session. These meaning-making processes take on a variety of forms that promote client self-awareness of the processes underlying meaningful career decisions.

Narrative

Perhaps the most ubiquitous meaning-making opportunity is that which exists while clients are relating important events in their lives. Counselors can significantly enhance their understanding of client self-organizing processes by listening carefully to the words and phrases used when clients relate an event or story. Although this appears to be rather obvious, professionals often overlook the positive impact of using clients' own interpretations as evidence of their meaning systems. Meaning-making occurs when counselors assist clients in becoming aware of the latter's meaning structures connect to create an overall life story and how the client interprets events in order to author a story that has sense, cohesion, and viability. Furthermore, collaborating with clients to create stories featuring possible, future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) greatly increases the likelihood of client growth and change. Counselors therefore need to be able to work effectively with client narratives in the following ways:

1. Listening closely to unique phrases and words used by the client.

2. Recognizing that client interpretations are unique and can be viewed as either viable or not viable rather than valid or not valid.

3. Assisting clients in moving beyond rational explanations of experiences to deeper underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions.

Metaphors

Metaphorical language is a valuable meaning-making opportunity often missed in counseling interactions. Although the benefit of working with client metaphors is beginning to be more widely accepted, counselors often overlook opportunities to use them effectively.

In everyday language, metaphors help transfer one idea or concept to another. When simple verbal descriptions fall short of describing experiences, metaphors provide a bridge towards deeper understandings (Hoskins & Leseho, in press). Working with metaphors within the counseling session is not an easy task. Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges facing counselors is to refrain from imposing their own metaphors onto the clients' experiences.

Asking descriptive and contrast questions helps to elicit metaphors from the client. For example, one client described her alienation from her friends when she returned to the workforce as no longer being the "hub" of a tight network of friends. She mourned this loss. After asking descriptive questions which helped her articulate, and "connect with," her experience of now being more like a "spoke of the wheel," the counselor was able to help her re-define her role as a friend and the overall meaning of friendship. Now perceiving herself as an integral part

of the network, but not necessarily the center, she felt more secure in knowing that she did not have to abandon important relationships in order to pursue her career. Consequently, this new version of *her* metaphor, explicated through effective questioning by the counselor, provided a visual reminder of a newly defined aspect of self which subsequently had a positive impact on her career goals.

Critical Reflection

Helping clients become more cognizant of their beliefs, values, and assumptions is a central component of meaning-making. Without a certain degree of self-awareness, people tend to lead mindless, haphazard lives where important decisions are often left to chance. A constructivist perspective promotes an "examined life" and encourages the critical reflection of values, beliefs, and assumptions.

Once beliefs, values, and assumptions have been explicated, clients are more likely to (a) deepen their understanding of their own world views and how these views influence their worklives; (b) gain insight into the origin of these world views; and (c) determine the viability of maintaining or perhaps revising their views.

Enhancing self-knowledge enables a person to assess life positions; in doing so, an individual can determine the extent to which these positions may either constrain or support growth in various aspects of employment. Counselors act as a mirror or a lens, enabling the client to gain more knowledge of self and the world. Through the process of explication, leading to either re-vision or re-affirmation, the final stage of empowerment occurs when the client realizes that choices can be made from different vantage points. Outdated, non-viable, beliefs and values can be modified and re-worked into broader, more inclusive structures of meaning.

Power

Counselors need to become aware of the ways in which they either empower or disempower clients through their counseling approaches. A traditional "test them and tell them" approach to counseling, for example, can disempower the client when the counselor assumes an expert position regarding the client's personhood. It is, therefore, important for career counselors to begin by clarifying expectations, roles, and tasks of both the client and the counselor. One client complained about a counselor who was not helpful because she refused to tell him what he should be. This highlights the importance of clarifying anticipated outcomes and processes as soon as possible. By doing so, clients can assume a proactive stance during the initial session.

Often counselors inadvertently disempower clients by asking questions that fail to promote critical reflection. Instead, they begin dispersing information that clients themselves could gather. While information is a necessary part of career counseling, how it is shared and received directly influences client motivation. Career counselors can significantly enhance their practice by re-defining their roles as "empowerment promoters" rather than information providers.

Conclusion

A constructivist framework can often appear vague and abstract to the novice counselor. There are no step-by-step strategies to direct the counseling process. Consequently, the abstract and nebulous realm of meaning-making can be frustrating for a linear, task-oriented counselor. On the other hand, working with clients as they become empowered through increased awareness of self, particularly in worklife issues, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of the traditional career counselor.

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Marie Hoskins is a doctoral student and instructor in the School of Child and Youth Care and Psychological Foundations at the University of Victoria, British Columbia.

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